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Russia Expresses Regret Over U.S. Missile Defense Project

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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MOSCOW (AP) -- Russia expressed regret Wednesday over the U.S. decision to begin deploying strategic interceptors to defend the United States from missile attack, a move Moscow said would destabilize the international security system and lead to a new arms race.

The Russian Foreign Ministry also expressed concern that the development of such a system would divert resources from other real threats -- above all the fight against international terrorism.

There was little reaction from other countries to the U.S. decision. In China, the official Xinhua News Agency merely carried a dispatch from Moscow detailing Russia's reaction.

In Tokyo, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said the deployment ``must not encroach upon Russia's security interests," the Interfax news agency reported. ``Nor must such actions encourage an arms race."

Development of missile defense systems was severely limited under the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which expired in June, six months after President Bush announced that Washington would withdraw from the 30-year-old agreement.

Marshal Igor Sergeyev, a senior adviser to President Vladimir Putin on strategic issues, told the Interfax news agency Washington had not provided ``any weighty arguments" that the new system was not directed against Russia. Sergeyev also said Russia was worried that radar systems in Denmark and Great Britain could support the new missile defense system.

The United States maintains that a missile defense system is necessary to protect the country against possible attack, primarily from rogue states that could possess ballistic missiles.

``Moscow with regret follows the activation of the attempt by the United States to create a so-called `global anti-missile defense.' Now, after taking a political decision to deploy in 2004 several strategic interceptors with support from space, the realization of these plans has entered a new destabilizing phase," the Foreign Ministry statement said.

Russia, which has fallen behind the United States in developing space-based technology for use in missile defense systems, consistently has said the ABM treaty should remain in force.

``Consigning its principles to oblivion can lead only to the weakening of strategic stability, a new senseless arms race in the world, including the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and diverting resources to counter today's real challenges and threats, above all, international terrorism," the statement said.

The Russian statement came a day after Bush ordered the Defense Department to begin work within two years on deploying the first interceptors that are to form the base of the missile defense system.

The Bush administration intends to ask Congress to allocate \$1.5 billion for 2004-2005, adding to the \$8 billion already budgeted.

The weapons to be deployed include six ground-based interceptors to be based in Alaska by the end of 2004, with 10 more added a year later. Four interceptors would be in California, for a total of 20 by the end of 2005. Twenty Standard Missile-3 interceptors would be aboard three Navy ships.

Hundreds of the Army's Patriot PAC-3 missiles would be deployed around the world to knock down shorter-range missiles in the final phases of their flights. The extra \$1.5 billion Bush is seeking also would buy 346 more Patriots.

The Russian Foreign Ministry complained that the decision to deploy the anti-missile program counters the priorities set by Bush and Putin to cut their respective nuclear arsenals and fight the spread of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism.

In Britain, former lawmaker Tony Benn and George Hutchinson of the World Disarmament Campaign wrote to The Guardian newspaper saying the proposed use of a British installation for the missile shield was "stupid and dangerous."

"Missiles to hit missiles are very unlikely to work. Giving the U.S. more rights over this country would need very explicit permission by parliament and in the present international situation would make us a more likely target for terrorist attack, without increasing our security," their letter said.

The Japanese government had no immediate reaction to the Bush plan. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda said the decision was America's and he had no comment, said Misako Kaji, a spokeswoman for the prime minister.

Calls to China's Foreign Ministry went unanswered Wednesday.

State-controlled media didn't make an issue of it, though, and Xinhua News Agency didn't comment other than carrying its dispatch from Moscow.

China and the United States have been playing nice in recent months, cooperating in the fight against terrorism and generally downplaying their differences in favor of more measured public rhetoric.